

COSANDEY, Fanny (dir.) — *Dire et vivre l'ordre social en France sous l'Ancien Régime*, Paris, Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2005, 336 n.

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around *signes d'honneur*. Returning to the debate in the 1960s over whether the *Ancien Régime* was a society of orders (Roland Mousnier) or of classes (Ernest Labrousse and Georges Lefebvre), the participants discovered a great deal that remained of interest. Attempting to classify people mentioned in documents, seminar participants could never agree on where to situate their subjects. The book, then, is the result of two separate insights — that social classification is important, but that there is no definitive answer to the question “how to classify?” Taken together, the contributors to the volume make a coherent argument, which is ably summarized in the conclusion. The Old Regime was not a society of orders. There was too much interpenetration between the orders, too many changes over time, and especially too many competing logics and centres of production of dignity — “the society of the Old Regime is not perfectly readable, not even for its actors” (p. 284).

The overall thesis, and most of the main themes of the book, can be found in Robert Descimon's article. Descimon accepts that there was indeed a “grammar of dignities [that] obeyed ... rational rules”, but he argues that there were several competing systems, making any agreement over rank and dignity impossible. He begins by presenting a tension between “personal” and “real” forms of titles (in the first, dignity is passed from parent to child; in the second, it is attached to a fief). There were also competing egalitarian modes of address, including those of Christian humility, friendship, and the centralizing state. Descimon then presents five centres of production of dignity — feudalism and the Church (the two oldest), municipal office, mastery of the law, and above all the power of the king. There is much that is of interest in Descimon's article, not least his insight that most Parisians could choose between a variety of titles and identities. No fan of the “linguistic turn”, Descimon sees conflicts over norms expressed through language as fundamental, but argues that “the process of change is ... purely social, based on a causality that is both economic and political” (p. 106). Accordingly he underlines changes revealed by the study of titles, of which the most important is the decline of both feudalism and the Church. Dignity (based in some notion of public service) was replaced by privilege as the founding ideal of society, leading to the “deficit of meaning created by absolutism” (p. 107).

One of the main problems with the notion of a society of orders is that forms of address are often expressive of personal relationship rather than absolute social position. Hélène Merlin-Kajman makes this point in her analysis of forms of address as described in dictionaries. She presents Loyseau's distinction between “authentic dignities” based on official function and expressive of hierarchy and titles given out of respect and expressive of reciprocity. The same words (such as *Monsieur*, *Dame*, *Sieur*) could be used to signify a quality that inhered to the person or to express personal respect, indebtedness, and friendship. Far from situating each individual at a specific distance from God or the king, titles express the relation between the speaker or writer and the addressee at a specific time. Christophe Blanquie presents the sys-

tem of nomenclature used in a *livre de raison* by a seventeenth-century rural notary and seigneurial officer. The notary followed two separate systems for identifying people, depending on whether they were elites or family. For non-nobles, personal relationship determined the title rather than relative position on an absolute scale.

Change in the forms of address over time meant that social stratification was never entirely clear to contemporaries. Laurence Croq presents two main changes: the relative simplification of titles and the increasing use of titles to distinguish nobles from *roturiers*. The period of greatest instability in titles is the early personal reign of Louis XIV, which is not surprising given the considerable energy devoted by the monarchy to verifying noble credentials. The social model in place in the early eighteenth century no longer saw nobles and commoners as part of the same Great Chain.

The influence of economic, political, and social changes on the system of rank and hierarchy is one of the main themes of the book. Catherine Goldstein analyses forms of address and interaction in the correspondence of members of the Paris mathematics academy in the seventeenth century. Goldstein argues that, by focusing on relations between scientists and their sponsors, previous studies of the links between science and rank have ignored the multiplicity of relationships, links, obligations, and favours expressed in other correspondence. While the pursuit of mathematics did bring people of varying social conditions into frequent contact with each other, the resulting blurring of distinction was never so thorough as to render mathematics immune to the influence of rank. Fanny Cosandey argues that conflicts over precedence illustrate the ways in which rank limited royal authority. The king's role in these disputes consisted of balancing between distributing patronage and following precedence rules that he could not change. The system was so complicated (specifically how to integrate three honour-producing systems of fief, Church, and office) that the king had considerable room to manoeuvre. While the claim that precedence disputes helped strengthen royal authority is not new, the notion that the king's authority in these disputes was limited is interesting and fits well with recent developments in the historiography on absolutism.

In the old debate from the 1960s and 1970s, one side saw the *Ancien Régime* primarily as a stepping-stone in the transformation from feudalism to capitalism, while the other saw it as a fundamentally stable and conservative society. While Mousnier's romanticized and reified vision is to be resisted, it seems to me that the vision presented in the book under review is unduly whiggish — it is the Renaissance, the Reformation, urbanization, and absolutism that made the social system opaque to both contemporaries and historians. My reading of Hélène Merlin-Kajman's contribution, however, suggests the possibility that no society is ever "perfectly readable" because of the logical problem inherent to the use of titles (specifically, is dignity given by the speaker, or attached to the person addressed?).

This is less a criticism than a reaction to a rich and persuasive book, an excellent return to an old debate that avoids the sterile dichotomies that surely explain why historians lost interest in the question. While the historians present different subjects and each contribution stands alone, there is much more consistency of argument and theme than is usually the case in article collections. It is disappointing that there is no discussion of the period after Louis XIV, but this is a criticism of the book's title

rather than its contents. The analysis of forms of address from the seventeenth century provides much fruit for reflection about the fundamental transformation from a medieval to a recognizably modern society.

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DUBE, Saurabh — *Stitches on Time: Colonial Textures and Postcolonial Tangles*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004. Pp. 259.

How can we re-think the notion of the “subaltern” in ways that pay attention to the vexed and contested subjectivities entangled in the mechanisms of colonial power? How have historiographical interpretations of colonial conditions become enmeshed in the very fabric of power, knowledge, and categorization that make historicity possible? What implications does this have for our reading of the relationship between colonial power and modernity? In *Stitches on Time*, Saurabh Dube draws from previous work in *Untouchable Pasts* (1998) and *Critical Conjunctions* (2002), but gives these questions fresh relevance by addressing them in new ways and casting them in a critical light that goes beyond the standard renditions that many readers have come to expect. As professor of history in the Center for Asian and African Studies at El Colegio de México in Mexico City, Dube offers an important dialogue between the kinds of debates associated with south Asian diasporic intellectuals in the anglophone West, and the ways in which the legacy of subaltern studies is being received and translated in a Latin American context. Through his own unique interpretation, strategic position, and cultural location, Dube departs from singular readings of colonial dominance and hence situates himself outside the orthodox conduit of established post-colonial scholarship.

Dube’s aim is to write a “history without warranty”, which at once cuts through simplistic renderings of a singular Western modernity and its universal history as much as it challenges the somewhat reductive employment of the terms “mimicry” and “hybridity” as tools to understand and make comprehensible the tightly knitted fabric of colonial culture. Instead, he offers an insight into the cracks and fissures of a south Asian modernity that was not merely the extension of the West into Indian social and cultural worlds. On the contrary, the first section of the book charts the ways in which Western colonial practices were strategically appropriated to create an ambivalent and yet highly politicized culture of resistance, and it thus offers new insights into the relationship between the colonial state, the culture of imperialism, and the mechanics of hegemony.

Dube does so by venturing into everyday sites where colonial power relations were inscribed outside the domain of institutionalized power politics between the colonial state and its subjects. In fact, Dube’s thesis is that we must look outside the arena conventionally designated as “political” (p. 38) to find the semiotic and spiritual stitches that have been sewn into the patchwork of colonial culture. He takes readers on a double-sided journey to the very places of cross-cultural exchange where colo-